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Paul's Use of the Imagery of Sleep and His Understanding of the Christian Life: A Study in the Thessalonian Correspondence

Piotr J. Malysz

Introduction

The imagery of sleep remains one of the most universal and enduring metaphors in human culture. Its prevalence can be explained not only by the fact that sleep, as a physiological function of the body, is characteristic of all of God's animate creation, but also by the very nature of sleep, which easily lends itself to a variety of interpretations. Some of these can be neutral or positive, as is, for example, the metaphorical understanding of death as sleep – though even in this context there can appear a streak of negativity, nostalgia, or helplessness. Others may suggest laziness, lack of caution, or the absence of watchfulness.

In the multiple and diverse references that it makes to sleep, the Bible is no different. It needs to be said, however, that the Jewish use of the metaphor is somewhat different from the Greek one, as is evident, for instance, in Paul's epistles to the church at Thessalonica.¹ In fact, in the Thessalonian correspondence, the apostle draws quite heavily on both of these traditions to paint a picture of the Christian life as an existence rooted in the fact of the cross and governed by the eschatological reality of Christ's second coming. This paper seeks to demonstrate that it is precisely by bringing out and playing on the euphemistic, as well as negative, meanings of the verbs *καθεύδω* and *κοιμάω* (sleep) that Paul unites all the various elements of his description into a coherent whole.

Background

Scholars agree that several factors occasioned the writing of 1 Thessalonians, all of which were, in one way or another, related to both Paul's hasty departure from Thessalonica (Acts 17:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16) and his failure to provide the new church with the fullness of

¹This paper was originally written for a class on 1 & 2 Thessalonians, taught by Dr. Charles Gieschen at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, in the Winter Quarter of 2000. I would like to thank Dr. Gieschen for all his helpful comments.

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apostolic instruction. Hence the apostle's desire to revisit in order to "supply what is lacking in [the Thessalonian] faith" [καταρτίσαι τὰ ὑστερήματα τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν] (1 Thessalonians 3:10).² Paul's departure naturally gave rise to accusations of taking the line of least resistance after the manner of numerous itinerant philosophers of the day – accusations that portrayed the apostle and his companions as interested not only in easy living at others' expense, but, worse still, in perverting the established social and cultural order. It was probably for the latter reason that the founding of the congregation was soon followed by an outbreak of prejudice, and perhaps, even persecution. Finally, not without significance for the composition of 1 Thessalonians, were certain undesirable doctrinal developments concerning the Lord's παρουσία that arose within the congregation following the death of some of its members, possibly in the persecution itself.³ Written from Corinth around A.D. 50, the epistle addresses all these pressing issues, with particular emphasis on the link between Christian life and eschatology, at the same time being a very positive reaction to Timothy's report about the state of the Thessalonian church (1 Thessalonians 3:6).⁴

Textual Issues

The focus of this paper will be primarily on chapters 4:13-5:11, which form the core of Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica, and in which the apostle employs the imagery of sleep. Where necessary, however, references will be made to other parts of the epistle and to

²All the quotations from 1 and 2 Thessalonians are the present author's own translation. The remaining biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible. New International Version*.

³This suggestion was put forth by F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 327-328, cited in Karl P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 349.

⁴F. F. Bruce (*1 & 2 Thessalonians* [Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982], xxxv) gives this dating of 1 Thessalonians. Karl P. Donfried dates the epistle to A.D. 41-44. See Karl P. Donfried and I. Howard Marshall, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 12.

2 Thessalonians as well, which followed not long after the first letter.⁵ It should be kept in mind that 1 Thessalonians forms a coherent whole, rather than being a collection of disparate remarks on the apostle's part or a redaction of various sources. Presupposed here is Paul's authorship of both the epistles, as well as their fundamental unity.⁶

The apostle uses two different verbs, the basic meaning of both being that of sleeping. The first, κοιμάω, appears in verses 13-15 of chapter 4, where it is the equivalent of "to have died in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Here Paul assures his addressees that those "who are alive and are left remaining until the Parousia of the Lord will most certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep" (15). The dead will not miss out. In the *paraenetic* section of chapter 5, the verb changes to καθεύδω, the discussion itself retaining the eschatological focus. Here the imagery is more complex, as other metaphorical elements are added to it. Thus Paul speaks of the day of the Lord coming "like a thief at night" (2). The Christians, however, are not "in darkness" (4) or "of the night" (5) to be surprised by the coming of that day. Nonetheless, the apostle exhorts them to refrain from sleeping and to stay awake (6). The section concludes with the statement, "God has not destined us for wrath, but for the possession of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live with Him" (9-10), followed by a command to "comfort one another and to build each other up" (11).

The New Testament evidence, as well as extra-biblical sources, shows that the verbs, καθεύδω and κοιμάω, are synonyms, with both appearing in virtually the same contexts.⁷ Both are used, for example, to denote

⁵The issue of the order of the Thessalonian letters has little bearing on this paper's subject matter. For a detailed discussion and a review of arguments, see Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, xxxivff.

⁶While it is recognized that 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 constitutes a *paraenetic* section, this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that it is a later, post-Pauline interpolation; compare Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 107-108. Obviously stylistic unity is of secondary concern for Paul, who is more interested in the unity of message. It is the message that determines his choice of stylistic devices.

⁷Compare Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, second edition (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 259; Walter Bauer and others, editors, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 388, 437.

sleep (καθεύδω: Matthew 8:24, Mark 4:38, Mark 13:36; κοιμάω: Matthew 28:13, Luke 24:45) and death (καθεύδω: Matthew 5:39; κοιμάω: Matthew 27:52, John 11:11, Acts 7:60, Acts 13:36, 1 Corinthians 7:39, 1 Corinthians 15:6, 20). There is, however, one significant exception: neither verb is used in reference to Jesus' death. Jesus did not fall asleep—He died for the life of the world and was raised from the dead (1 Thessalonians 1:10) that He might be “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” [ἀπαρχὴ τῶν κεκοιμημένων] (1 Corinthians 15:20).⁸

Interpretation

It is in the resurrection that the new being and life of the Christian find their indestructible foundation. Everything that Paul addresses in his epistles is ultimately motivated by the reality of Christ's resurrection. Longnecker observes: “when Paul spoke about the fact of the Christian's resurrection hope, about events and relationships having to do with that hope, and when he exhorted his converts to preparedness, he did so on the basis of Jesus' resurrection and teachings.”⁹ Put differently, the resurrection is “the irreducible basis of the gospel.”¹⁰ It underlies God's gracious call and election, because it is only in the risen Jesus that one finds rescue from the coming wrath (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

As is to be expected, the reality of Christ's death and resurrection, received “not merely in words, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and in much conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5), separates the Christian community from “the others” [οἱ λοιποὶ] (1 Thessalonians 4:13; 5:6)—from the rest of the world, which remains under God's eschatological wrath. The moment of coming to faith, whether by baptism or through hearing the word, constitutes a watershed in a person's life. Here the atonement, as it is appropriated through faith, becomes absolutely pivotal. Since it is out of the context of God's impending wrath that the believers have come, it seems necessary first to consider the

⁸Bruce opines that no euphemism was used for the death of Christ not because it would have been inappropriate in the context of death by crucifixion (such a euphemism was used, for example, to describe the death of Stephen in Acts 7:60, ἐκοιμήθη), but rather to stress the reality of His death, and thus also the divine miracle of the resurrection (1 & 2 Thessalonians, 97).

⁹Richard N. Longnecker, “Paul's Early Eschatology,” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 92.

¹⁰Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 97.

pagan lifestyle as depicted by Paul in his Thessalonian correspondence, before a description of the Christian life proper can be offered.

Under the Wrath to Come

As it emerges from the pages of 1 Thessalonians, the pagan life is an existence permeated with uncertainty, ambivalence, and ignorance. Although the pagan world is under the divine wrath, this wrath, as a tangible reality, is only eschatological. In the here and now it manifests itself as the absence of hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13), especially concerning those who have died. "Hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope," writes Theocritus.¹¹ Likewise, Plutarch, in a letter to a friend who has lost a son, urges reason as the best cure for grief – after all, all people are mortal. A similar appeal to reason is found in Seneca, who scolds a friend for an unbecoming and excessive display of grief.¹² Thus, even though the metaphor of death as sleep was very common in ancient Greco-Roman literature, it denoted a sleep from which there was no awaking.¹³ Hardly a source of comfort, the word "sleep" embraced the whole ambivalence of human life and death – it was an attempt to avoid confrontation with the harsh reality by hiding behind a euphemism.

In extreme cases, this overpowering and fatalistic lack of hope led to a nihilistic or abusive attitude towards the present, with self-gratification as the focal point of all human action. Through a figurative use of the verb "to sleep," Epictetus gives the following piece of advice to Epicurus, known for his pessimism regarding human society: "Lie down and sleep, and follow the pursuits of a worm of which you judge yourself worthy; eat and drink, mate, go to the privy, and snore."¹⁴ This does not mean, however, that morals were loose everywhere, that there was no structure to society, or that the prevalent self-seeking prevented any kind of meaningful human interaction. Peace and security were not totally absent. Usually it was recognized that, despite fate's arbitrariness, life still had to go on. The most widespread approach to life seems to have

¹¹Idyll 4.42, cited in Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 96.

¹²Plutarch, *Letter to Apollonius* 103F-104A; Seneca, *Epistle* 99.2. Both are mentioned in Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 63.

¹³Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 96.

¹⁴Diss., II, 20, 10, cited in Albrecht Oepke, "καθεύδω," Gerhard Kittel, editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament [TDNT]*, volume 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 432.

combined the Stoic resignation to one's unalterable fate with the Epicurean enjoyment of the present moment—an approach that was given its classic expression in Ode XI by the Roman poet Horace (source of the adage *carpe diem*, “seize the day”):

Ask not, Leuconoe (we cannot know), what end the gods have set for me, for thee, nor make trial of the Babylonian tables! [referring to the calculations of the Chaldaean astrologers] How much better to endure whatever comes, whether Jupiter allots us added winters or whether this is last, which now wears out the Tuscan Sea upon the barrier of the cliffs! Show wisdom. Strain the clear wine; and since life is brief, cut short far-reaching hopes! Even while we speak, envious Time has sped. Reap the harvest of to-day, putting as little trust as may be in the morrow!¹⁵

In general, the law written upon the hearts of men made it possible for them to form meaningful social units and to interact with each other with a view to common good. The “peace and security,” however, were rather deceptive (1 Thessalonians 5:3), built as they were upon fallible human institutions and philosophies and holding out no eschatological hope. Against this, Jesus’ warning, of which Paul may have been aware, sounds forth with particular force: “in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:38-39).

It was in the religious cults of the day that the ambiguity and ambivalence of existence — the lack of hope — were manifested in the most radical fashion. Donfried enumerates a number of deities whose worship was popular in Thessalonica.¹⁶ Among those the most prominent were Isis, Serapis, Dionysius, and especially Cabirus, all of which focused on fertility and involved grave immorality and ritualistic prostitution (sometimes in an attempt to propitiate the deity, at other times, as an expression of the overarching self-centered worldview). Once the popularity of the various Eastern cults is taken into consideration, it becomes obvious that it is not without deeper theological motivation that

¹⁵*Carmina*, Liber Primus, XI. The translation by C. E. Bennett comes from Horace, *The Odes and Epodes* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1952), 33.

¹⁶Donfried, “The Cults,” 337-342.

the apostle Paul implicitly refers to the pagans as being "of the night and of darkness" (1 Thessalonians 5:5). This designation is not a mere metaphor. That adherents of the cults are the real referent is strongly supported by Paul's scathing criticism of immoral behavior. The pagans are driven by "passionate lust" [ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας] (1 Thessalonians 4:5), they do not abstain from fornication [πορνεία] (1 Thessalonians 4:3), and have no control over their bodies, especially the sexual parts.¹⁷ One must remember that in mystery religions the night was usually the time of the enactment of the cultic ritual.¹⁸ The night was the time of drunkenness, either as ritualistic activity or as an attempt to deal with the oppressiveness of reality, to forget. It was under the cloak of darkness that sexual laxity was at its most rampant.

All in all, Paul attributes the depraved behavior of the pagans to the fundamental lack of the *true* knowledge of God (1 Thessalonians 4:5). Behavior is here merely a symptom of the underlying ambivalence of existence. But the latter, too, is, in fact, little but symptomatic of the Greco-Roman perception of the divine realm. On the one hand, the ancients worshiped a whole pantheon of gods. Conceived anthropomorphically, those were identifiable and approachable, but, at the same time, they were not free from passions, partiality, and self-interest. Invoked primarily for the sake of their gifts, they could not, however, be objects of unconditional trust, driven as they were by the incessant desire to secure their own divine position. In keeping with their mutability and definite origins, they lacked constancy, not to mention omnipotence and omniscience. On the other hand, though the Greco-Roman religion did have a concept of a yet higher—and immutable—power, *Moirā*, in its unrelenting and inexorable unchangeableness, fate was neither spiritual, nor personal, let alone ethical, and thereby could not be the object of religious devotion. The only answer to the dark heartlessness of fate was resignation. Holding out no hope for the future and without a perceptible direction, this

¹⁷For a discussion on the meaning of σκεῦος (1 Thessalonians 4:4), see, for example, Donfried, "The Cults," 342. A more extensive argument to the same effect is found in Torleif Elgvin, "'To Master His Own Vessel': 1 Thess 4.4 in Light of New Qumran Evidence," *New Testament Studies* 43 (October 1997): 604-619.

¹⁸Interestingly enough, all the commentaries consulted do not make the connection between darkness and immorality other than a purely metaphorical one. Against the view that sees the use of "darkness" in purely rhetorical terms, it must be emphasized that the figurative use is here based on fact.

fatalism lies at the root of life's ambiguity. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that, with no true knowledge or trust in God, neither can there be love of the truth in the pagans' lives (2 Thessalonians 2:10-11). This significant absence, too, must lead to depravity. Consequently, the darkness is not only physical or spiritual but also, if not primarily, cognitive. In a futile flight from the oppressive and hopeless reality, the pagans fall back on that very reality, as they delude themselves with man-made peace and security. They are asleep. They will most certainly not escape the suddenness of the coming destruction and wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

To Serve the Living and True God

It is out of the hopeless existence only for the present moment that the Christians have been called. As has been said, God's call into a Christ-like life grounded in the reality of His death and resurrection constitutes a watershed in the life of believers. They have not been called into uncleanness, but into sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:7). Note that in the Old Testament, sanctification is inseparably linked with the *cultus* — only the holy ones can approach God. Its basic idea is that of separation, of being set apart for God. Hence the Thessalonians can no longer serve idols, the gods of the night, but the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Along the same line, Raymond Collins observes that "The faith of the Thessalonians . . . denotes an essentially new condition of existence within the Thessalonian community which stands in contrast to a previous mode of being"¹⁹ — it is an existence of "perseverance through hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). In contrast to paganism, the Christian life takes on an unambiguous future orientation.

As those who have received the Spirit of God (1 Thessalonians 4:8; 1:5), the believers are no longer in darkness. "But you, brothers," writes Paul, "are not in darkness that the day [of the Lord] should overcome you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness" (1 Thessalonians 5:4-5). Two different aspects of the sonship of light can be seen in this description.

First of all, the Thessalonian Christians are no longer ignorant about the future (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Light implies knowledge (cognition) and

¹⁹Raymond F. Collins, *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1984), 213.

certainty. It is because of this knowledge that comes from faith that the congregation will not be surprised when the day of the Lord comes. Faith and knowledge are reciprocal concepts, with one informing the other.²⁰ Interestingly, as E. Lövestam observes, the phrase υἱοὶ φωτός is not identical with υἱοὶ ἡμέρας.²¹ The latter has a purely eschatological meaning: the day of the Lord is still to come (2 Thessalonians 2:2-3). Yet, as the sons of light, the Thessalonians have nothing – no night – to fear. For them the future is linked to the present by means of a divine disposition.²² Thus, the eschatological reality has, in a sense, dawned already. Though “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (2 Thessalonians 2:7), the church at Thessalonica finds itself under God’s eschatological mercy. They already are “the sons of the day,” whereas the unbelieving world remains under God’s eschatological wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:9). For the pagans, the day of the Lord, when it comes, will be nothing else but endless night.

The strong sense of hope that Christians have cannot remain without practical implications, especially regarding the death of community members. Paul is very emphatic here: faith cannot be based on ignorance “about those who have fallen asleep” in such a way that the Christians’ display of grief is a practical denial of any real foundation to their hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Those who have died have truly fallen asleep. Here again Paul takes a metaphorical expression – widely used for euphemistic purposes to avoid the brutal reality and the offensiveness of the term “death” – and, similarly to his treatment of the term darkness, employs it in a sense that is far less figurative. Those who die in the Lord die in the certain hope of a resurrection at His second coming. In view of the event of the cross, this sleep cannot but lead to an awakening. Thus it is truly rest, and as such, it warrants no excessive grief. The sorrow of Christians is “unlike other sorrow for it is embraced by hope.”²³

²⁰Collins, *Studies on the First Letter*, 226. Ronald A. Ward (*1 & 2 Thessalonians* [Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1973], 110) argues that darkness stands for “moral and spiritual estrangement from God” rather than ignorance. This view is only partially right in that it discounts the cognitive aspect of faith, whereby trust in God is, and must be, firmly grounded in His own self-disclosure.

²¹Cited in Joseph Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1997), 110.

²²Collins, *Studies on the First Letter*, 249.

²³Gary W. Demarest, *1, 2 Thessalonians, 1, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), 83.

But it is not merely in their attitude to death that the Christians are guided by a firm eschatological perspective. The sonship and knowledge of the light are not simply cognitive. The hope concerning the future is not simply a state of the mind. Rather, the whole of the Christian life in the here and now is informed by the knowledge and the hope in such a way that the two cannot but become active qualities, always at work in the person who believes. To be a son of light, therefore, means to believe in the Lord and to trust in Him in all future *and present* things, even in the midst of lawlessness and suffering (1 Thessalonians 3:3, 7). To put it yet another way, to be a son of light means to lead a sanctified life, where sanctification, as Collins points out, is a *nomen actionis*, denoting a process rather than a goal.²⁴ A life of sanctification is one lived in agreement with God's will (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

In the *paraenetic* section of 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul makes it abundantly clear that the sanctified life is one of being awake. There is no place for sleep in it. For this figurative understanding of the verb "to sleep," the apostle is indebted to the Jewish tradition, as well as to some of the end times sayings of Jesus. Thus the Old Testament portrays God as the One who does not sleep (Psalm 121:4).²⁵ The righteous man, too, is represented as staying awake. Of course, sleep is inevitable; yet, even while asleep, a man of God meditates on the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:7; Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; Proverbs 6:22). Likewise, Jesus Himself rises early in the morning to pray, and even devotes whole nights to prayer (Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12). In this context, Albrecht Oepke notes that the early Christian community viewed the sleepiness of the disciples in the garden as almost demonic.²⁶ This having been said, it needs to be noted that it is not sleeping in the literal sense of the word that is the real fault. The Gospels, for example, present us with a picture of Jesus asleep in a boat in the midst of a raging storm (Matthew 8:24; Mark 4:38; Luke 8:23)! Similarly, in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, all the virgins were asleep: both the wise and the foolish ones (Matthew 25). What is the real fault, therefore, is not sleep as much as the attitude of spiritual and ignorant sleepiness. Sleep is here contrasted with being awake and watchful [γρηγορέειν].

²⁴Collins, *Studies on the First Letter*, 309.

²⁵This is in contrast to the gods of the ancient Greek mythology, who were capable of human-like sleep; compare Oepke, "καθεύδω," *TDNT*, 433.

²⁶Oepke, "καθεύδω," *TDNT*, 436.

Consequently, a life of sanctification is a life of watchfulness, a life of being awake—it is an existence “of the day,” rather than “of the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:5). What this means is that the Christian no longer spends his or her life in pursuit of mindless pleasure, but rather leads a life of service to others. The behavior of the apostle Paul and his companions during their stay at Thessalonica is a case in point. “For you remember, brothers,” Paul reminds the Thessalonians, “our labor and hardship: we worked night and day so as not to be a burden to anyone, as we proclaimed the gospel of God to you” (1 Thessalonians 2:9; compare 2 Thessalonians 3:8). Similarly, the Thessalonian Christians, as imitators of the apostles and of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2 Thessalonians 3:9), are encouraged to “lead lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:12). The paradigmatic Christian life is characterized by “work of faith, labor of love, and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:3). It is a life of “holiness, righteousness, and blamelessness” (1 Thessalonians 2:11) and, if need be, also a life of suffering, for faith looks to and has as its model the suffering and death of Jesus (1 Thessalonians 3:1 and following).

Unlike the night, the day is the time of sobriety, and Paul exhorts his addressees to stay awake and remain sober (1 Thessalonians 5:6). Only then will they be able to maintain their focus on the Lord and to express it in faithful and loving service to the community. Those who are insubordinate, disorderly, and who refuse to work [ἄτακτοι] are to be admonished (1 Thessalonians 5:14) and, if necessary, shunned and refused means of subsistence (2 Thessalonians 3:6). The day has a future orientation, a *vocational focus*, as it leads to yet another day; the night encourages self-seeking in its short-sighted emphasis on the present moment. It makes one vulnerable to temptation (compare Luke 22:46), be it idleness, drunkenness, or immorality. As such, the night truly is spiritual sleep, and it will lead one to spiritual death under God's wrath. Darkness—the Thessalonian Christians are to remember—provides a false sense of peace and safety; in reality, it only darkens and blinds the heart. A life of darkness is a life of sleep deceptive in its security—when the destruction comes with all its suddenness, nobody will escape and nobody will be spared. The darkness of the Lord's Day will not be nearly as enjoyable as that of cultic ritual, for example.²⁷ “Therefore,” writes

²⁷Compare Amos 5:18-20: “That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though

Paul, "let us not sleep like the others. . . . Since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on a breastplate of hope and love, and a helmet of the hope of salvation" (1 Thessalonians 5:6, 8).²⁸ Only through the watchfulness of the faith will the Christians be ready for the day of the Lord. "[I]t is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: 'Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you,'" writes Paul to the Ephesians (5:14). One should note that the apostle's language in 1 Thessalonians suggests familiarity with Jesus' end times discourses. It was Jesus who warned that the day of the Lord would descend like a thief upon the sleeping world (Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15). Jesus Himself encouraged watchfulness. "[K]eep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come," He cautioned His disciples (Matthew 24:42). In the Book of Revelation (16:15), the Risen Lord says, "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake."

Paul concludes the *paraenetic* section with the following statement: "God did not destine us for wrath, but for the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we might live together with Him" (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10). Most commentators agree that here the apostle returns to his discussion of the Parousia in chapter 4. Those who have died—fallen asleep—in Christ will live with Him in the same way as those whose toil is not yet ended and who remain awake, waiting for the Lord's return. All Christians, dead or alive, are equal before Christ. In his epistle to the Romans (14:9), Paul affirms, "Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the living and the dead." Interestingly enough, Paul does not change the verb *καθεύδω* back to *κοιμάω*, which he used in reference to the faithfully departed. For one thing, this proves the synonymy of the two verbs. It is not, however, a mere stylistic attempt to avoid repetition on the apostle's part, as most interpreters seem to suggest. On the contrary, Paul uses the verb *καθεύδω* to bring together the two separate strands of his discussion: contextually the verb refers back to the discussion of chapter 4, while at the same time being an extension

a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light—pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?"

²⁸Compare Romans 13:12 "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."

of the imagery of spiritual sleep found in chapter 5. It is quite likely that in so doing Paul desired to make a justification statement that would crown his entire exposition of both the Lord's second advent and the Christian life. Ultimately, and this is what all Christians are to keep in mind, salvation is not by works, but proceeds from God's gracious election in Christ. It is a gift of God's grace through faith.

Unfortunately, this interpretation is rejected by a number of commentators who claim it is unlikely for Paul to have made a statement violating his strong emphasis on Christian living. Bruce states, for example, "It is ludicrous to suppose that the writers [*sic*] mean, 'Whether you live like sons of light or like sons of darkness, it will make little difference: you will be all right in the end'."²⁹ This view, however, is too restrictive in that it isolates 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 from the rest of the epistle, and the rest of Paul's theology, for that matter.³⁰ Moreover, it should be noted that this sort of argument is later countered by the apostle himself in his letter to the Romans, "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (Romans 6:15). Because the Thessalonian Christians have been called out of darkness, they no longer have anything to do with it. Voluntarily to plunge back into it would be to reject God's salvation. But this does not mean that there is no forgiveness for those who out of weakness fall into sin. On the contrary, there is forgiveness for the weak-hearted, for those who have little hope, or for those who have trouble exercising self-control (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Concluding his second epistle, Paul insists that the idlers are not to be treated as enemies (2 Thessalonians 3:15). Thus, in a conscious attempt to preserve the integrity of justification, rather than fostering un-Christian behavior, Paul caps his whole discussion with a wonderful statement of the gospel. Even those who happen to fall asleep have forgiveness in Christ.

²⁹Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 114. So also Ward, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 113.

³⁰Those who hold this view would perhaps be surprised to find themselves reflecting Nietzsche's sentiment that Paul's idea of God who justifies the undeserving destroys the received (propitiatory) idea of the divine: "deus, qualem Paulus creavit, dei negatio." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, in *The Twilight of the Idols; The Antichrist*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 1990), 175. Despite numerous contemporary attempts to marginalize the role of justification in Paul's theology, Nietzsche seems to have understood Paul's message very well—even if only to reject it, as well.

Conclusion

In his Thessalonian correspondence, Paul presents the newly founded church with a depiction of the Christian life amidst the unbelieving world. Yet, despite all the rich facets that the discussion entails, the apostle, in a truly masterful way, never loses sight of the resurrection grounding and the unequivocal future focus of Christianity. He manages to achieve this unity, in part at least, by employing the imagery of sleep in a variety of ways, drawing on both the Greco-Roman and the Jewish traditions. With regard to the former, he successfully counters the prevalent deterministic philosophies of the day and transcends the mere euphemistic character of the term "sleep," as he underscores the crucial element of Christian hope. Death for the believer truly is sleep. Paul then goes on to present the Christian life as one of watchfulness in a series of exhortations that remain very much in keeping with the Jewish perception of sleep. In so doing, he reacts with particular force and clarity of argument to cultic immorality, so widespread in the Thessalonica of the first century. Finally, by once again appealing to the imagery of sleep, he unites all the strands of his discussion into a coherent whole, crowned with a justification statement that firmly puts the focus on the cross. It is through the cross that all sleepiness is forgiven. It is through the cross that the dead are now asleep only to wake up to eternal life at Christ's second advent.